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ABSTRACT

Sociologists will improve the status of their discipline and contribute more to the solution of social problems if they recognize sociology's relevance to the private sector. Four concerns are basic to this recognition--identifying the private sector's needs, ascertaining how other disciplines appear to meet these needs, recognizing factors which impede sociological practice, and improving the packaging and marketing of sociological skills. Sociologists can focus on these concerns by investigating the following questions. What real world issues offer the greatest challenges to sociologists? Why is so much sociological research critical of social and business conditions? How can a particular company gauge future markets? How can a company best serve a given market? What social changes may arise to affect business operations? How can sociology research be more objective regarding the business sector? What types of advice do people in the non-academic world expect from sociologists? In summary, it is suggested that sociologists' contributions to the private sector will be viewed more favorable and acted upon more often if sociologists familiarize themselves with business needs and interests before offering advice. (DB)

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SOCIOLOGY IN THE MARKETPLACE: MELIORATION IN A NEW SETTING

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ABSTRACT

The misperception on the part of some sociologists and many critics that Sociology has nothing to say to the private sector is a key factor not only in the discipline's underdevelopment, but in the status of social problems we face today. Both are much worse off than they need to be because of this fallacious argument, and both will continue to worsen unless some attempt at bringing sociology back into the real-world fold is made. Professionals can help a new age of sociological practice to come into being. The paper discusses four topics of relevance to that endeavor: 1) The private sector's needs, 2) How other disciplines appear to meet those needs, 3) What ambivalences impede sociological practice, and 4) Presentation of sociological self: packaging and marketing our skills.

The misperception on the part of some sociologists and many critics that sociology has nothing to say to the private sector is a key factor not only in the discipline's underdevelopment, but in the status of the social problems we face today. Both are much worse off than they need to be because of this fallacious argument, and both will continue to worsen unless some attempt at bringing sociology back into the real-world fold is made. In this paper I would like to offer some thoughts on what we as professionals can do to bring a new age of sociological practice into being. These thoughts are organized around four topics, each of which will be taken in turn in the following pages:

1. What are the private sector's needs?
2. How do other disciplines appear to meet these needs?
3. What ambivalences impede sociological practice?
4. Presentation of Sociological Self: packaging and marketing our skills

1. THE PRIVATE SECTOR'S NEEDS

It is no surprise to readers that industry's concerns fall mainly into two interdependent groupings: those issues which are market-oriented, and those which are production-oriented. In both of these areas, sociological practice has as much,if not more to offer,than any other discipline because of its focus on the relationship between the elements of the social system, for example, people and institutions, and the system itself.

For its part, the private sector is vitally concerned with gauging future markets, for its economic "life" depends upon accurately estimating the scope and nature of those markets in conjunction with its particular mix of resources and abilities. Typical questions that the private sector,in the form of a high technology company, might ask are: "Will nuclear technology be used in any way?"

"Will bioengineering fly?" and "What about computers -- how large will they be, where will they be installed and for what purposes?" The very next set of questions on the list will then be related to how the particular company in question can address these markets. The planning group might thus ask "Should the company try to compete with Xerox, IBM, Kodak, etc., in the field of x?" Perhaps the company has a technology which it has not yet unveiled. Then the question will be: "Will technology y be ready by the year 2001 (or some other date)?" And implicit in the foregoing is the query: "What have we learned from previous technology implementation that we ought to be especially careful about in developing technology z (so that we don't fail)?" The answers to this second set of questions are a function of the company's present product mix and technological capabilities, its estimates of future resource availabilities, including manpower and its projections of capital requirements, and what it foresees will be its environmental "climate".

The answers to the second set of questions, how the company can address what it envisions future demands will encompass, brings it to consideration of what can be a deep philosophical issues: what social shocks in the form of social movements or wars might arise that would affect the company's operation, and how will the government respond to these shocks in forms that will influence the company's operation? We know from a study of history that the private sector has been deeply influenced by "turbulences" in its environment, and that it has had to meet each challenge on its own terms. For example, a cursory review of some of these events (each of which derived only from the public sector) reveals:

1. anti-trust activities of the 1900's
2. conservation movement
3. labor movement
4. prohibition
5. social security
6. atom angst of the 1950's
7. peace movement
8. environmentalism of the 1970's
9. job health and safety

There has hardly been a moment in time when business could operate "as usual" for there has hardly been a year when some new societal concern did not thave implications for the private sector.[1] The largest of these implications is, of course, what the government will do about the perceived problem, and how that action will affect the company. Will it require all widgets to have safety interlock devices that preclude their operation under one set of "normal" operating conditions but not under another set? (For example, a "smart" seat belt would "know" when you were simply parking a car in the garage, and when you were about to fling yourself dangerously out onto the highway.) Will widget monitoring and regulation be bureaucratized, merely legislated perhaps, extensively researched, or left to the market, or all four? For example, although EPA mandates that "social impact analysis" be performed in conjunction with every EIS, very little bureaucracy has arisen to handle this aspect of the problem. Not surprisingly, the quality of these SIA's is poor and has little impact on policy-making itself.

If the government engages in a massive response to the identified problem area, then it may be necessary for the company to expend its resources not only in addressing the problem technologically, but in developing new organizational structures and functions to comply with government mandates. Many companies now have environmental management departments involving fairly significant dollar costs, personnel shifts or acquisitions, and facilities for testing and evaluating possibly offending products and/or processes. In keeping with the trend of the times, they may soon have societal analysis departments as well.[2]

In summary, then, the market-oriented questions raised by the private sector are:

1. Gauge future markets
2. How can company address those markets?
3. What social shocks may arise to affect the company's operation?
4. Government's response to those social shocks.

Clearly interdependent with this set of concerns is another the focus of which is production-oriented. Social problems affect not only the market's response to industry's offerings, but production workers (from assembly line to board room) as well, and circumscribe the firm's response to innovation. We are used to traditional labor-management disputes over wages and conditions. Today's issues go beyond these shibboleths. Lifestyle changes permeate our culture, bringing with them a host of related changes. Academic achievement has been heading downward while economic aspirations have been heading upwards. Demands for shorter workweeks and workdays have paralleled demands for job enrichment. Women are playing an increasing and increasingly vocal role in the labor force. Alienation in all its guises has become a prominent feature of daily life, from alcohol and drug abuse to activism on every conceivable ideological front. In some ways the U.S. has become a vast paper battleground. Each firm not only has to consider that workers (again, at every level) resist being slotted or "tracked," it must also consider what their probable skills in relation to the jobs it will require them to undertake will be. It must even consider what the skill availability in the open market will be, should it decide not to perform a particular function in-house. These are sociological problems of the first rank in theoretical and practical importance, and should be of vital concern to professionals in the discipline, especially to those who have complained about past solutions.

Industry has not been shy in the past to secure expert counsel when it has identified a problem area. Indeed, the vast beltways surrounding our major cities would be barren wastelands without the proliferation of consulting firms that have arisen specifically to meet industry's needs. This brings us to our next topic: to whom does industry listen, and why.

2. PACKAGING AND MARKETING EXPERTISE: SOME EXAMPLES

We're all social scientists and so we should know the process by which any interest group -- say experts -- establishes a claim and proceeds to mine it. We have watched operations researchers model "our" social system, systems analysts redesign it, economists price it, and lawyers haggle over it. We have even seen industrial relations experts claim a piece of this turf, and by becoming middlemen and controlling information channels, institutionalize themselves and broaden their scope. On the basis of our inactivity while all this was going on, we deserved to lose. But if humility is the beginning of wisdom--and we have much to be humble about--then surely we are on the road to wisdom when we assess their successes. Let's review the industrial relations folk, for many of them are sociologists and it's always preferable to keep the quarrels within the family.

When industry was getting off the ground in this country, after it had established itself and become part of the American scene, labor disputes took on a prominence they had not attained in the preceding decades. To be brief, management could not manage the virulence of these difficulties and saw its very existence threatened. Some rather canny IR experts claimed they were the only ones who could talk to committed labor leaders, and industry believed them. After all, it had tried and failed. Meanwhile, these same experts told labor leaders that they (the experts) would help the working person gain economic and

social advantages against business, if labor leaders would support their work. Supported by both sides, the IR experts became middlemen in the negotiation process. In many cases, they performed nobly, settling unresolvable conflicts and bringing relative harmony to extremely difficult situations.

Regardless of whether this happy outcome always materialized, it has been the process followed by each successive group of intermediary experts. And when they have been able to cloak their knowledge in obscure jargon, such as legalese or medical terminology, or in vast printouts of computer data, society has not only accorded them high prestige but also high pay.

Foremost among the reasons for their success has been the fact that they were willing to meet the private sector on its own terms. This means that they did not purposefully seek to reform it although implementation of their work did indeed transform the terms and conditions of business' operations as well as in many cases, its shape. Instead, these successful disciplines sought to learn what industry wanted to know and then thought how they might supply that information to the best of their ability. If a company needed help in some area, the successful practitioners sought to provide that help in whatever form they could. In other words, they not only provided a service but backed it up by substantive research. This substantive research may have had deep theoretical significance, or it may have been superficial, but it helped to provide an answer that was better than any answer of which the firm was aware. If as social scientists we are appalled at the decision making which follows from knowledge developed in this manner, might we not have ourselves to blame for failing to undertake some of these pragmatic challenges? In the halls of our academies might we not seek to peg more of our research efforts towards clarifying some of these real world issues? I think the answer is "yes" and I also

think that the outcome can only be beneficial to all parties concerned.

3. AMBIVALENCES IMPEDING SOCIOLOGICAL PRAXIS

There are some specific reasons why sociology in particular and social science in general have difficulties "making it" in the private sector, and these difficulties lie on both the receiving end as well as the donor end of the social exchange process involved. Social science by its very nature in uncovering the facts about social systems, acts as a debunking science. Since most social changes are enacted in ways which serve to continue the privilege of existing authorities and institutions in society, sociological information — which contains elements of inherently critical commentary on the existing state of affairs — is unlikely to be welcome. But for its own part, sociology often compounds the fault. This is especially true when one considers the pejorative tone of much published work in the discipline on the business world, as if participants in the situation would always "know better" and are therefore "evil" in what they do. No physician castigates the virus for attacking the cell. Rather, epidemiologists describe the boundary conditions under which infection may take place, the probabilities of survival under varying treatments, and what agents interfere with the operation of the viral mechanism. They may be passionate about their effort in the study, and they may "hate" the object of their work because of its effect on their loved ones. But this affective element is excluded from their scientific reporting. Hence, as a rule of thumb, I would suggest that if you find Marxian analysis to be a useful tool (and I do), you should translate it into less hortatory terms before you present it to representatives of the private sector. They will listen to your message if you don't

make their blood boil, and if what you suggest is sensible, they will try to find ways to make improvements. Psychologists have been particularly successful in transforming the overbearing jargon and ideology of psychoanalysis into sensible terms that are meaningful to people who have other problems to solve besides their personal grails, and consequently, psychoanalysis, arcane though it is, has moved steadily into the business world.

There are three important consequences of permitting the affective aspects of social analysis to enter our work. The first is that too little attention has been paid to the situational matrix within which the private sector operates. Few critics understand the complexity of forces operating upon industry, and how these interweave to produce both unanticipated consequences as well as consequences which are easily misinterpretable under conspiratorial theories of history. Many faults are attributed to industry which rightly belong to other sectors of society. As private citizens we are entitled to lump all representatives of the business world together as "them" along with government institutions and authorities. But when we perform social analyses, such an approach is Procrustean.

The second important consequence of allowing affective components to intrude upon praxis is that we genuinely overlook a variety of outcomes that follow from maintaining the status quo. The private sector is particularly responsive to real changes in public sentiment, as it must be in order to succeed. But it often lacks a mechanism or organizational structure for implementing changes which might address the needs reflected in shifting public opinion. The result is that change is accomplished in a clumsy and cumbersome fashion. For example, industry-union contracts have evolved into very specific statements of rights and duties that leave little scope for innovation. Yet,

in many cases, both industry and workers would prefer different arrangements which are precluded under the bargaining areas traditionally accepted as points for compromise. Sociologists have the capability of spotting these social changes in the making, analyzing their possible outcomes, and of advising management of their progress so that change might be facilitated in a more bloodless manner. However, it is important to realize that industry is not a major social change agent: it can only lead where people will follow, and the public may be more conventional than the social analysts. For another example, it is surely true that many sociologists were among the forefront of the environmental movement. Had they been employed in the private sector at the time, they would have advised their companies, backed up by sound social analysis, of the depth and penetration of this sentiment in the public. Instead, industry received poor advice and took a "wait and see" attitude which neither advanced its credibility nor helped it, where appropriate, to develop potentially profitable product lines either in the pollution control device market or in improved, non-polluting technology.

The third result of not being objective where the private sector is concerned is that much of social science research is honestly irrelevant to that sector's needs. Business is certainly the repository of applied logical positivism, for the market acts like a vast Skinner box. Hence it is genuinely interested in research that will improve its understanding of that box so that it may respond more accurately and with fewer shocks. For the most part, social scientists in industry (qua scientists and not as personnel administrators) have been limited to performing psychophysical studies for audiovisual technologies, testing equipment design, etc. The truly <u>social</u> component of the consumer has been overlooked. And yet that component, which distinguishes people more completely one from another and from other species of animal life than any other

characteristic, is primary in human behavior. If any sector of society should, for example, study alienation, it should be the private sector, for that sector stands to gain the most from such analyses. A welcome by-product of such studies would be an enormous improvement in social indicators upon which all our social programs are based, and presumably a general increase in societal equity would ensue. But there are many more topics of theoretical relevance, the practical relevance of which we now have a marvelous opportunity to explore. We'd have more research results if our theories were tested by more segments of society than students in "Introduction to Sociology, 101." And we'd have more possibility of implementation in the long run of the results of these studies than if we waited for the federal government to undertake the task.

We have not only come to believe in our debunking, but we have persuaded ourselves that applied research equates with manipulation of the proletariat. Apart from a romantic identification with a bygone social class and the self-congratulation that accompanies noblesse oblige, this attitude has little to recommend it. Going back to the medical analogy, we have no qualms about research establishing that 250,000 units of penicillin and not 500,000 is a satisfactory dose for a pathogen: we do not castigate the physician for "exploiting" the patient by giving a smaller dose. But we tend to feel that there is something improper about traversing the learning curve in industry: somehow, cost reductions must always be at the expense of the customer, consumer or jobholder. We forget that efficiency is one of the elements that makes a Segovia or a Rembrandt great, just as it is a key to keeping industry alive.

We have an identity crisis, then. We distinguish between science and technology, between research and engineering. But our social science is mainly words. And we're locked in a trap created by many of these words so

that we cannot accomplish the goals towards which these words are directed. We'd all like to see a social system that can't be raped and pillaged by administrative, bureaucratic, corporate, academic or public interest soldiers of fortune. But that golden era cannot materialize without the hard and pragmatic work on our part that social changes implies. Many of you have been associated with one or more of the utopian communities that flourished in the 1960's. Some of you may still be involved in them. But one thing all of you have learned from your experience is that models rarely match reality, and that the key to improving the fit is the practical work of finding the rubbing points, compromising on solutions, and keeping up your spirits through the reality of daily life.

It is the same with sociological practice. Yes, you will have to compromise your ideals. Yes, you will have to work on problems of theoretical insignificance. Yes, there is a lot of hack work even in the most rewarding of tasks. And yes, people are so slow to comprehend, to understand, to move with you. It takes so much time, and they don't understand what you do. Sometimes, you don't understand what you do, either. But you're groping and your're doing it, and off in the future, you're coming closer to a goal. And now, let's look at some mechanics of how to attain that goal.

4. PRESENTATION OF SELF: PACKAGING AND MARKETING SOCIOLOGICAL SKILLS

As experts on social networks, sociologists should take their own advice. We know that networks develop their own "truths" and that these truths specify tasks that often form the bases for genuine employment. For example, the competitive mentality of the bored upper classes in 19th century England and America led members of this set to devise a new arena in which they might display trophies of their "hunts" and develop new objective correlatives of

their social status. This new arena was the purebred dog world, and today it provides alternative status attainment for a number of disadvantaged groups in society, employment for people in the drug, food, equipment, automotive and service sectors, and generates a measurable fraction of the Gross National Product.

The first suggestion then, is to analyze the target. Categorize its "worries" and think about them. Develop a social science model placing this worry in a broader context, and critique that. Then translate this improved model into a research program, commentary or policy. One way of going about this task is to acquaint yourself with the technical-engineering-managerial-financial press. These groups regularly air social issues that impact their work, and you surely will have something to contribute to their literature. You'll be surprised to find that they publish commentary quite readily if it is brief, well organized and to the point.

The same approach applies to government. Policy makers convene panels of people about whom they have heard, or whose work they have read, and as public interest advocates have taught us, from whose efforts they have not been able to escape. Participation confers legitimacy, as we all know, and we all ought to do more to see to it that we are included when social issues, the subject of our specialty, are considered. Some notable engineers have testified at more government hearings on social policy than they have on engineering matters. We do not need to accept this state of affairs, and it will not continue if we involve ourselves in the policy-making world.

Once the target has been defined, there are some specific suggestions that will help you to get your message across. Let us turn to these, for they unfortunately are bypassed in graduate curricula and eschewed by many professors who strive for an image of profundity.

The most important elements involved in preparing for a presentation are clarifying its goal and the strategy by which that goal will be attained. Every message has a goal; unfortunately, it is often too implicit to be understood. Is the purpose of the presentation to explain a particular phenomenon, to entertain, to raise the listeners' level of awareness, or to secure funding for a vital project? Be clear about what you are trying to do, and your message has a chance of being clear to your listeners.

Once the goal is defined, you must develop a strategy for attaining it. As pointed out earlier, people do not like to have their basic values called into question or insulted in the service of an analysis they might otherwise accept as correct. Nor are they as moved by appeals which hit wide of the mark as they are those which are on target. Unfamiliar though their world may be, it is your duty to find out enough about it that you can talk to them in their own terms, and learn which appeals are likely to be most effective. For the most part, this means relinquishing our beloved sociological verbiage, as well as foregoing the expression of ideological preferences often swathed in that esoteric tongue.

With this background work out of the way, you can proceed to the format of the presentation. There are several outlines which are equally good. Most of you are familiar with the one which goes "Tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em; tell 'em, and then tell 'em what you've told 'em." I prefer one which outlines your thesis, illustrates it and calls for specific action on the listener's part. Being something of a ham, I even like to jazz up my talks because if other people are like me, they're thinking about other things most of the time, and it takes something extra to wake them up.

Regardless of the format chosen, there are some specific points that sociologists in particular need to learn about giving presentations to the

non-academic world. (Since 85% of us are employed in academia, it's no wonder we haven't learned these items.) First of all, use audio visual aids to outline and simplify your talk. The topic is unfamiliar to your audience, and they may even be hostile to it. An outline helps to provide a peg for the unaccustomed mind's wanderings and studies show that retention of visually presented material is significantly higher than that which relies on only auditory pathways. Moreover, you will not have time for a complex presentation, and you risk losing your audience if you attempt it. Secondly, do NOT refer to or appeal to authority.[3] Nobody listening to you knows who those authorities are, and furthermore, they assume that if you are knowledgeable, the point needs no argument. Related to this subject, it is imperative that you forego a tiresome explanation of the methodology by which you obtained your results. That is a technical matter of concern only to other professionals with whom you may dispute at your leisure. Fourthly, you should make some attempt to place your argument in the context of your audience. In the business world, this context is often its cost effectiveness, or its relationship with an existing or ongoing program, or its potential in the future to aid in the achievement of market or industry goals. The final point perhaps is most crucial of all: <u>get to the bottom line</u>. This means focusing on the results of your study, detailing the action program you are advising, asking for the specific help the need for which you demonstrated, or telling your listeners what the program is going to cost. The bottom line is the objectification of your goal, and if you have been given only the proverbial three minutes in which to explain yourself and find your time running away, forego all the rest and go to the bottom line. The bottom line is the action line, the line of scrimmage, and it defines not only the people who are allowed to play, but those who get paid for doing so. So to

recapitulate:

1. Use audiovisual aids to outline and simplify your talk
2. Do not refer to or appeal to authority
3. Forego a methodological disquisition
4. Place argument in appropriate context for audience
5. Focus on results if time is limited

We live in a period of great excitement and social change -- more or less as have most generations before us -- with the difference that some of the fundamental changes occurring revolve specifically around the spread and articulation of our discipline into the harsh world of policy from its haven in the social world of academic knowledge. It is a test that I am confident not only the discipline, but its practitioners, can pass with honors. I look forward to the day when there will be no more incredulous queries to the effect: "Yes, you're a sociologist, but what do you DO in industry (in government, in the private sector)?" And I look forward especially to the day when sociologists themselves have developed sufficiently broad self images that they least of all, will need to ask such questions.

FOOTNOTES

1. Sociological analyses which have made the simplifying assumption that such turbulences by and large did not exist have done the discipline a disservice by helping to obscure the patterned interactions that were operating. A variety of turbulences arising from competitors in the private sector as well as from the government, has not even been considered here. With reference to the first point, for example, the English transport industry did not corner the market although English patents and engine development were initially far ahead of their competitors because the English government placed such heavy restrictions on their use: from 1820-1840, steam vehicles paid a toll twenty times higher than horse-drawn carriages and early automobiles were required by law to consume their own smoke. In 1861 this sounded the death knell to development, and was only softened to interdicting "excessive smoke" in 1891 after German, French and American companies gained decisive leads. (British examples from Sir William Hawthorne's presentation at CRD on Sept. 6, 1979.)

2. What the impact of widespread penetration of such expertise will have on the public is a matter for conjecture. When one company undertook to analyze social trends, critics claimed the company was readying a "mind-control" apparatus. I suspect that not a few sociologists might count themselves members of the critics in this case. If so, they are overlooking the magnificent opportunities this development presents for increasing the substantive base of our knowledge.

FOOTNOTES (Cont.)

3. I'm convinced that in years to come we will no longer need to adumbrate our expositions with such superfluities, and that they are the insignia of our disadvantaged status in the scientific community (otherwise what we say would be important enough in its own right).